

A Book Review: 21st Century Reading 1

Creative Thinking and Reading with TED Talks

By Robin Longshaw and Laurie Blass.

National Geographic Learning/Heinle Cengage Learning, 2015, 160 pp.

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Abstract

This paper describes the focus and philosophy of *21st Century Reading 1: Creative Thinking and Reading with TEDTALKS*, published by Cengage Learning. Also included will be the teaching methodology and individual nuances described in the textbook. This paper then analyzes the strengths and limitations in using the textbook for a communication class. The paper then describes the students' and teacher's reflections on the book before analyzing its efficacy in teaching a communication class before finally approving of and recommending its usage.

Basic Overview

21st Century Reading 1: Creative Thinking and Reading with TEDTALKS is the first volume of a four-book series from Cengage. Published in 2015, along with its concurrent listening and speaking series, this series represents a partnership between two esteemed institutions - National Geographic and TED (Technology, Entertainment and Design) Talks. National Geographic is an internationally recognized media empire focused on science, geography, history, and world culture, and one that has spanned three centuries. The TED conferences, while more recent, cover a similar space and have become wildly popular due to the innovative spirit and palatable content delivered in their renowned talks. Both organizations have drawn from their similar mission statements in an attempt to create a more innovative and modern type of textbook.

This book's focus is on developing essential knowledge and skills for learners to succeed in today's global society. The series teaches core academic language skills such as global awareness, information literacy and critical thinking (Longshaw, 2015, p. 6). Each unit (of a total of 10) is comprised of three parts: "Read, Learn and Explore". The "Read" section introduces a topic and gives the learner a context from which to progress through the unit. "Learn" incorporates an actual TED Talk to broaden the learner's knowledge of the unit's topic. "Explore" encourages learners to complete a collaborative research project to allow the learner a chance to internalize the topic and unit contents as well as the spirit of both National Geographic and Ted Talks.

The book has four primary targets. The first, fundamental language skills, addresses vocabulary building and reading skills with an emphasis on teaching strategies for understanding key ideas, language use and purpose. The next focus, 21st Century themes, covers interdisciplinary topics that affect individuals in a global society such as business technology and global awareness. The third focus is on learning skills, dwelling on the classic "4 C's" of critical thinking, communication, creativity and collaboration. Following this, *21st Century* describes contemporary literacies and the ability to deal with information in a variety of modern formats and media. Finally, the textbook tackles visual literacy, information and media literacies (Longshaw, 2015, pp. 6-7).

21st Century is an attempt by the publisher to modernize English language learning. The book features real-life stories of individuals who in their own way tried to change their own experiences. The book uses authentic language and provides learners with familiar models of learning as well as ones that may seem more progressive. The book also includes analytical, reflective and problem-solving skills that may not appear in every textbook. These types of activities, however, are presented alongside more traditional learning models of reading and listening comprehension, vocabulary building and group exercises. The book has an accompanying teacher's guide full of extra details and helpful suggestions and a DVD that contains audio tracks and the TED Talks themselves.

Strengths

It is conceivable that English teachers have been arguing over what the ideal textbook is for eternity. A common complaint is that most textbooks are dated and full of inauthentic content. *21st Century Reading* is certainly a laudable attempt by both TED Talks and National Geographic to address this. Eschewing the repetitive drills and generic cartoons-without-context that fill most standard textbooks, in both its focus and layout, *21st Century Reading* tries to grab students' attention from the first page. Immediately learners will notice the striking photography that has come to define National Geographic. As a teacher I appreciated how the learner is dramatically introduced to the topic by using these photos.

Learners are instructed to employ valuable pre-reading skills such as activating their prior knowledge, examining the pictures and reading the picture captions and titles, all in order for learners to activate the students' funds of knowledge and formulate their own expectations before reading. These are skills that are simply not practiced enough in English classrooms. The general layout of the units in *21st Century Reading* is not revolutionary (typical reading comprehension and vocabulary building exercises appear), but they are supplemented with eye-catching photography and accessible infographics and visual aids. Towards the end of the opening "Read" section of a unit, there are more challenging questions that focus on critical thinking as well as optional extra-curricular activities (often through the use of online resources) related to the unit's topic.

All of this sets up what is perhaps the defining feature of this textbook, the TED Talk itself. Learners are again asked to activate prior knowledge and sharpen their prediction and

vocabulary skills before they watch a short segment of a TED Talk, (about 5-7 minutes, sometimes split into two segments, generally actual TED Talks are 20 minutes in total). These talks are often very interesting and the learners will have been adequately given a firm context to absorb the talks. The accompanying pre- and post-viewing questions do a great job of challenging learners' comprehension and critical thinking skills. Indeed, with a focus on maintaining the learner's attention, the video clips chosen are a veritable "Greatest Hits" of TED Talks, complete with dynamic speakers, interesting topics and funny jokes.

Limitations

The final section of each unit, called "Explore," attempts to pass the teaching onto the students by introducing a collaborative project related to the topic. I found this to be the least productive of the three sections of each unit. The projects, while interesting and clearly with a focus on student-led learning, offer very little scaffolding and support. While I suppose this was meant to be provided by the teacher, more supplementary materials for both the students in their textbook and the teacher in the teacher's guide may have helped enhance the textbook's efficacy. As I judged many of these projects to be limited or unsuitable to both my students and the classroom environment itself, I often moved on to the next section in the unit or developed a parallel project independent of the textbook that was more tailored to the needs of my students.

I also found that while my students excelled at more of the standard parts of the textbook (i.e. reading comprehension questions, vocabulary exercises), they often struggled with the more challenging critical thinking and "meaning from context" type questions. While it is true that textbooks are meant to be challenging and offer a form of comprehensible input, I was still vexed by the drop-off in performance between different sections of a unit as well as the different types of questions within a unit. Whether the fault lay with my own classroom execution or the cultural differences between the Japanese educational system and that of the publishers of the textbook or the textbook itself, a more cohesive or gradual level of difficulty would have been appreciated.

Another related minor complaint I would have with this textbook and its series is that the English language level necessary to use this textbook is fairly high. As this is the first and lowest (language level wise) book in the series, it and its series are only accessible to students who already possess intermediate language skills, something like the B1 level of the CEFR scale. I

would love to see National Geographic, TED Talks and Cengage Learning try to expand the series and reach lower-level students with their innovative approach.

Class Reflection (Spring of 2018)

In the spring semester, I was given *21st Century Reading* to use as a textbook for a communication class. I did not choose this book personally, and was a little surprised by the selection of the reading version rather than the listening and speaking version of the textbook series, but quickly understood the logic of the choice. The Japanese English education system is very heavily focused on the reading of texts, vocabulary acquisition and grammar—components this book directly addresses. The book, however, is not so rigid as to preclude the type of listening and speaking that would be more common in a communication-focused classroom. I found the textbook easily adaptable to such an environment and combined with the use of projects tailor-made for my students, this yielded very satisfactory results.

As for the students themselves (10 total, seven freshmen and three sophomore students), in written evaluations at the conclusion of the class, they generally found the book enjoyable and were positive about their experience with it. Some themes were recurring in their evaluations. Many students expressed a fondness for the “colorful” and “beautiful” pictures. The videos were also seen favorably. The topics chosen were also praised; specifically, one student wrote that they enjoyed the unit on fashion because of a “personal interest” in fashion. Another student remarked that they enjoyed the idea of motivating oneself expressed in one video. Other students liked that the book covered all four domains (reading, writing, listening and speaking) of English language education. Although there was significantly less criticism of the book, a difficulty in understanding the reading sections as well as answering certain questions was mentioned by more than one student.

Conclusion

Overall, I thoroughly enjoyed using *21st Century Reading 1: Creative Thinking and Reading with TEDTALKS* in my Spring 2018 semester communication class. The students enjoyed it as well. I had mistaken a tendency for certain students to fall asleep during the TED

Talk video sections as disapproval, however after reading student evaluations as well as talking with the students, I learned that this had more to do with the after-lunch timing of the class, rather than any disapproval of the content. The debate on what constitutes the ideal English language textbook will continue, but the inclusion of striking photography, infographics, visual aids, pre-reading strategies, authentic language, topical and popular content, engaging videos and innovative projects in a textbook already full of established and time-tested language acquisition methods, is certainly a step in the right direction. While far from perfect, I would gladly use this textbook again in the future.

References

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